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INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Forming Partnerships With Tribal Colleges to Meet Early Childhood Personnel Preparation Needs

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Having enough well-trained early intervention personnel continues to be a challenge on the reservations of our country. The Higher Education Partnership Project was designed to help address this challenge by providing a model of outreach training for reservation sites. The project involved collaboration with two tribal colleges, offering courses to students and professionals working with children with disabilities and their families. The program was successful in teaching critical competencies and building a local capacity for teacher training. Factors that led to this success were the involvement and support of personnel from the reservation in all phases of the project, making the courses sensitive and relevant to students' needs and cultures, and planning for the long-range continuation of the courses.

A significant challenge in the field of early intervention is finding enough qualified, well-trained personnel to meet the needs of young children with special needs and their families (Squires, 1995; Winton & McCollum, 1997). The shortage is especially critical in many of the reservation areas of our country. The Higher Education Partnership was designed to help alleviate this shortage on two of the reservations in South Dakota, and to provide a training model for other areas with similar

needs. The project was specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of early intervention professionals working in reservation areas. This article will provide background information about the project, a brief description of the project and how it was implemented, project results, and a discussion focusing on suggestions to consider when developing similar types of personnel preparation programs.

A survey of all educators and administrators directly involved in providing early child-

hood services to children with disabilities in school districts and cooperatives in South Dakota documented the need for trained personnel (see Forest, 1990). Following this survey, South Dakota made a commitment to ensure that all early childhood professionals serving young children with disabilities have the competencies necessary to provide high-quality services. The state issued rules and regulations mandating that professionals responsible for classrooms consisting of young children with disabilities must have an endorsement in early childhood special education. The endorsement required professionals to take a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework in six areas, including a 3-credit-hour practicum.

The state then implemented a training initiative consisting of telecourses and summer institutes, but few reservation-based personnel attended. To reach the professionals working on the reservations, the Center for Disabilities at the University of South Dakota proposed the Higher Education Partnership Project to bring training directly to the reservation communities.

The two reservations chosen for this project were the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations. The Rosebud Reservation is located in Todd County, which has a population of 9,246 and an unemployment rate of over 80%. Twelve percent of the children enrolled in their schools have been identified as having special needs, and an estimated 49% of the children under age 18 live in poverty. Shannon County, which includes the Pine Ridge Reservation, one of the largest reservations in the United States, has a total population of 11,837. Twenty-five percent of the children enrolled in their schools have been identified as having special needs, and an estimated 44% of the children under 18 live in poverty. The number of children between the ages of 3 and 5 qualifying for special education services at the two reservations combined averaged 66 children per year over the last 5 years (Cochran, 2000). The state Interagency Coordinating Council reported that the number of children from birth to age 3 qualifying for services at the two reservations combined averaged 71 per year over the last 5 years.

Several characteristics of these reservations

contributed to the choice of these locations for this project. Both reservations had local accredited institutions of higher education with existing special education programs and faculty. Both had a strong commitment to provide supports for young children and their families, evidenced by their Child Find programs and clinics. Finally, community members on both reservations made commitments of time and resources to support the project.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The project was funded as an early intervention training initiative from the federal Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD) and the South Dakota Office of Special Education. It was initially funded for 3 years and then given a one-year extension. A continuation of the project subsequently funded for an additional 4 years, is currently in operation.

The project was designed to establish partnerships with the tribal colleges, offer courses that would cover the competencies the state outlined, and provide the scaffolding needed to help the colleges continue to offer the courses in the future. Because one out of every four states has Native American colleges, this project would also provide a model for other states to follow.

Model Elements

Partnership building. From the very beginning of the project, tribal personnel were involved in planning and providing suggestions. Advisory committees were established on both reservations, consisting of tribal college faculty, administrators, students, early intervention personnel, public school directors of exceptional education, and community members and leaders. The groups met to discuss a variety of issues, including the best time and location for the courses and effective ways to advertise. They also identified local family members who could be invited to the classes to share their experiences. The project faculty worked in close collaboration with the administration, faculty, and staff at the two tribal colleges to discuss development of the courses and to develop future plans.

Cultural considerations. Careful attention was given to cultural issues and the unique concerns of Native American people. The course on policy, services, and legal issues had specialized components in governmental policy issues that directly affect tribal operations and tribal health, education, and social services. These included issues of self-determination and cases involving tribal sovereignty. Native American children's books, such as the Native American Cinderella story, "The Rough-Face Girl" (Martin, 1992), as well as books from a variety of other cultures were used when presenting ideas for curriculum. Reservation personnel gave the project staff university catalogs, student handbooks, and reading material describing their tribal beliefs on such topics as family life, disability, and leadership. They suggested incorporating books such as "Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children" (Bruchac, 1997), as well as other books in this series.

The staff worked to weave Lakota values into the courses, including the belief that children are sacred, and the Lakota values of Woksape (Wisdom), Woohitika (Bravery), Wowacintanka (Fortitude), and Wacantognaka (Generosity). Class discussions consisted of generating ideas on how to incorporate these concepts and traditions in teaching and therapy throughout the curriculum. Suggestions included language and cognitive activities, such as traditional storytelling and learning Lakota words, as well as motor activities, such as making traditional dream-catchers and movement experiences with native music.

Portfolios and course competencies. Competencies for each course were based on the competencies listed in the state rules and regulations. Students were required to compile a portfolio for each course to document their proficiency in the course competencies. The portfolio consisted of journal entries with reflections on the assigned readings and activities completed both in and outside of class. It also contained special projects the students designed for use in their current or future jobs and to demonstrate their skills. This type of assignment has been shown to be effective in helping students

Table 1.

Course Offerings at the Tribal Colleges

-
- Survey of Early Childhood Special Education: Typical and Atypical Development
 - Policies and Services and the Legal Aspects of Early Childhood Special Education
 - Curriculum in Early Childhood Special Education
 - Evaluation, Screening, and Assessment in Early Childhood Special Education
 - Family Systems in Early Childhood Special Education
 - Working as Teams in Early Childhood Special Education
 - Practicum in Early Childhood Special Education
-

apply new skills (Wolfe & Snyder, 1997). In addition, students placed a list of course competencies in their portfolios, along with a description of how the materials in their portfolio demonstrated their proficiency in each of the competencies. Students were also given pre- and postcourse questionnaires to document their perception of the importance of the competencies to be acquired in the courses, as well as their skill level on the competencies.

IMPLEMENTATION

Coursework and Curricula

The Project Director and Training Specialist hired for this project were the instructors for the courses. During the first months of the project they gathered and reviewed existing coursework in early intervention. They set up a series of courses (Table 1) designed around each of the areas specified in the new state rules. Students could register for either graduate or undergraduate credit. Graduate students were expected to do additional work requiring them to use more of the current research and literature in the field.

Schedule and phases of courses. Seven courses were designed to meet the required state competencies. One course was offered each semester beginning in 1994. The courses were offered one weekend each month at each reservation for 3 hours on Friday evenings and 6 hours on Saturdays for five weekends, totaling 45 class hours. The plan called for the project faculty to offer a complete set of courses and a

practicum, and then for the faculty from the reservation itself to continue offering the courses.

Instructional strategies. The project instructors prepared lectures, large and small group discussions, and a variety of activities. These activities included case studies that would allow students to apply their theoretical knowledge (Fallon, 1996). Learning centers also became an integral part of the course plans. Different types of learning centers were designed, based on the course content. In the assessment course, for example, students worked with various screening and assessment tools at the centers. In the curriculum course, learning centers consisted of materials personnel could use to enhance their curricula. The centers were designed to model appropriate practices and help students understand how to implement learning centers into their own classrooms (Fox, Hanline, Vail, & Galant, 1994). The wide variety of instructional strategies used were designed to meet the unique needs of adult learners and to keep them actively involved in their own learning throughout the long weekend format of the courses.

Students

One hundred and twenty-two students from a wide range of professions enrolled in one or more of the courses, including early intervention teachers, Head Start teachers, administrators, and therapists. Twenty percent of the students had a master's degree, 56% had a bachelor's degree, 12% had an associate's degree, and 12% did not have a degree. Most of the students were currently working at the reservation. Of those who indicated their ethnicity on the demographics questionnaire that was given, 32% responded they were Native American. Most of the remaining students came primarily from either a Caucasian background or had both Native American and Caucasian backgrounds.

Forty percent of the students stated on the demographics questionnaire that they were taking courses simply to gain skills and information, whereas only one-third expressed an interest in obtaining the endorsement. Nevertheless, over 35 students completed all of the courses as well as the practicum and qualified

for South Dakota's Early Childhood Special Education endorsement.

Developing Local Capacity

At the beginning of the project, the staff was unaware of any individuals on the reservations who had completed all the coursework required for the endorsement in early childhood special education. Therefore, one of the major tasks of the project was to reach as many professionals as possible. Project staff placed advertisements in the tribal newspapers and made announcements on radio stations. They visited schools in the area, posted flyers, and met with teachers in the faculty lounge at lunch and after school. In addition, they mailed flyers to other schools and centers.

Project staff worked from the outset of the project to design syllabi, lecture notes, handouts, overheads, and course outlines which could be passed on to the tribal colleges to be used in future courses on an ongoing basis. These materials were organized into kits for each of the colleges, along with videotapes that could be shown in each of the courses, reference books providing background material, children's books featuring Native American authors and themes, and materials to help the colleges set up learning centers and other activities.

Recruiting faculty for the subsequent rounds of courses was an issue that was addressed from the beginning of the project. Project staff discussed possible instructors with tribal college personnel and recruited students in the courses who demonstrated a high degree of leadership, knowledge, and skill. There were two individuals with a master's degree on each of the reservations that completed the coursework and were therefore able to help teach the courses in the future.

EVALUATION

Description of Data

Throughout the first phase of the project, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from students, families, and tribal college personnel. A demographic questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of each course to

gather information on the participants. Project staff administered the Self-Rating of Professional Skills Instrument (Bailey, Buysse, & Palsha, 1990) to gather data on students' perceptions of their knowledge and skill level before and after each course they took. Instructors also administered the pre- and post-course questionnaires documenting students' perception of the importance of the course competencies, as well as their skill level for the Curriculum, Teams, Assessment, and Families courses. A paired sample t-test was used to assess if gains on these instruments were statistically significant. In addition, Cohen's measure of effect size (Cohen, 1988) was used to assess the magnitude of the gain. Cohen's delta (d) was calculated by dividing the average gain by the respective pretest standard deviation.

Other information was gathered to help assess the effectiveness of the project. Students completed course evaluations at the conclusion of each course. Instructors used a checklist of course competencies when reviewing student portfolios to help determine students' progress toward attaining the competencies. At the end of the initial 3 years, the project's outside evaluator traveled to the tribal colleges and conducted interviews to further determine the effectiveness of the model (Snyder & Wolfe, 1997).

Summary of the Data

Results of a paired sample t-test examining the difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores for each of the measures of the Self-Rating of Professional Skills instrument showed that in each of the courses, students made significant and substantial gains across all measures. Table 2 shows that all average gains were statistically significant ($p < .001$). In addition, Cohen's d indicated that students' gains on curriculum knowledge, skill level, and assessment skill level were moderate ($d > .50$), whereas the remaining gains were all large ($d > .80$).

Students also made statistically significant and substantial gains from pre- to post-test on self-ratings of their course competency skill levels. Table 2 shows that students made large

gains ($d > .80$) on each of the skill levels. There was little change, however, in students' pre- and post-test ratings of the importance of the course competencies, suggesting that all course competencies were important to students both before and after they took the course.

Results of the course evaluations showed that, overall, students felt the courses were responsive to their concerns and that their educational needs were met. Students believed the courses helped them to achieve their professional goals, and indicated they would recommend these courses to others. Using the checklist of course competencies, instructors also found evidence that students had successfully documented their proficiency in the competencies through their portfolios.

After the first round of courses the outside evaluator conducted semistructured interviews with 13 individuals on the reservations including tribal college personnel, a Director of Exceptional Education, therapists, aides, teachers and parents. One of the themes that emerged from these interviews was a high degree of satisfaction with the courses, including content and delivery. Another theme that emerged was that the camaraderie that developed during the courses contributed to the overall success of the project. Other themes indicated that this project was successful because the project staff took time and listened to the needs and the concerns of the students and professionals on the reservation, and that the staff brought the courses to them. Tribal college personnel wholeheartedly expressed their support of the project and their intent to fund and continue the courses when the project funds ended. They stated that the courses would continue because their own staff participated in the training, project staff provided the training materials and resources for each of the courses, and staff would continue to be available for consultation and technical assistance.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FIELD

The primary goal of this project was to help individuals acquire the skills and competen-

Table 2.
Mean Scores for the Self-Rating of Professional Skills and Course Competencies Measures

Self-Rating of Professional Skills													
Course	Knowledge Level							Skill Level					
	n	Pre	(SD)	Post	(SD)	Change	d	Pre	(SD)	Post	(SD)	Change	d
	28	2.58	0.78	3.73	0.75	1.15***	1.48	2.45	0.85	3.41	0.58	0.96***	1.13
Survey Curriculum	40	3.05	0.77	3.55	0.77	0.50***	0.65	2.79	0.82	3.30	0.89	0.51***	0.62
Assessment	34	2.73	0.88	3.79	0.77	1.06**	1.20	2.54	0.90	3.25	-0.86	0.71***	0.79
Families	28	3.13	0.80	4.24	0.53	1.11***	1.39	2.87	0.79	3.80	0.75	0.93***	1.18
Teams	34	3.27	0.80	3.95	0.73	0.68***	0.85	2.90	0.86	3.68	0.76	0.78***	0.91
Self-Rating of Course Competencies													
	Importance							Skill Level					
	n	Pre	(SD)	Post	(SD)	Change	d	Pre	(SD)	Post	(SD)	Change	d
	41	4.68	0.54	4.52	0.78	-0.16	0.30	2.70	0.93	3.48	0.95	0.78*	0.83
Curriculum	36	4.78	0.42	4.85	0.24	0.07*	0.17	2.37	1.12	3.38	0.75	1.01***	0.90
Assessment	27	4.82	0.81	4.85	0.28	0.03*	0.04	3.11	0.87	4.26	0.63	1.15***	1.32
Families	35	4.64	0.39	4.71	0.37	0.07**	0.18	2.70	0.94	3.98	0.67	1.28**	1.37
Teams													

Note. Scale ranged from 1 to 5.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

cies necessary to provide high-quality services and supports to children with disabilities and their families. The project was successful in reaching this goal. Given the scarcity of trained personnel before the project began, the training of over 120 students increases the likelihood that more effective services for children and families will be available on these reservations. Students rated their overall skill and knowledge level substantially higher at the end of the courses and indicated that they believed it was a result of participating in the courses. Another critical goal of this project was to establish ongoing training that would continue long after the grant was completed. This was accomplished by working closely with tribal college personnel throughout the project to infuse the courses into their schedules of classes and by having the courses listed in their catalogs as regular parts of their course offerings. This has occurred at both reservation colleges where the courses continue to be offered.

Challenges

A number of factors provided unique challenges. Finding appropriate on-site practicum supervisors who were trained and experienced was very difficult. Project faculty did most of the supervision themselves, visiting the practicum teachers once in their classrooms and reading their journals and assignments. On one of the reservations, project faculty were later able to delegate most of the responsibility of visiting the students to a Director of Exceptional Education who attended the first set of courses. Turnover of faculty and administrators at the colleges provided additional challenges, but the project faculty was able to meet with new personnel as they came on board. Additional challenges included the distance that the staff had to travel to get to the reservation, coupled with the sometimes-hazardous road conditions and unpredictable weather. With the great expanse covered by the reservations, many students themselves had to travel great distances; 36% traveled over 50 miles and 5% made a trip of 200 miles or more.

Table 3.

Factors that Facilitated the Success of the Project

1. Involvement and support
 - Active involvement and support of tribal education leaders, tribal institutions of higher education and community members in the inception and development of the project, including the establishment of local advisory committees
 - Support and involvement of several key state-wide entities, such as the Office of Special Education, Advocacy Services, and the Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities
2. Making courses sensitive and responsive to student needs and cultures
 - Holding classes on the reservations
 - Scheduling classes as weekend seminars once a month, allowing teachers who are working with young children during the week to take part
 - Providing students with training materials, textbooks and tuition stipends
 - Including culturally relevant issues and materials
3. Working to ensure the future continuation of the program
 - Identifying future instructors
 - Mentoring new faculty taking on the new rounds of courses
 - Providing kits of materials to the tribal colleges to facilitate the teaching of the courses on their own in the future

Factors Leading to Success

For those hoping to initiate similar programs, there seemed to be three major factors that contributed to the project's success (Table 3). The first critical factor was the active involvement and support of groups both on and off the reservation. Having local college faculty take part in the courses was especially beneficial because it helped to ensure that there would be someone on staff, trained to teach the courses.

Other important factors were sensitivity and responsiveness to students' needs and cultures. Teaching courses on-site made an important difference in the success of this partnership. Overwhelmingly, students reported they had

not participated in telecourses that had been offered because they preferred to have the instructor available in person. They also stated that becoming familiar with course instructors was one of the main reasons they continued to take the courses. Sharing food was one way instructors built rapport with the students; this is an important tradition in many Native American cultures. Taking time for this seemed to contribute to building camaraderie, adding to a "community of learners" atmosphere. Recognizing the expertise that the participating students bring to class is another important factor in making this type of program successful. Course participants bring the richness of their cultural traditions, ideas they have used in their own classrooms, and community connections they can share with each other.

A final key to success was planning for the continuation of the courses from the outset of the project. This involved identifying and mentoring future course instructors. It also included providing materials to the local colleges that would allow them to easily continue teaching the courses.¹

Establishing partnerships with tribal colleges can be a very effective way of reaching an underserved segment of our population. Providing this type of educational opportunity makes it possible for people with long-term interest in their communities to develop the skills and competencies they need to serve the children and families of their area.

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¹ The Higher Education Partnership Project overheads, syllabi, course competencies, and other course information are available, at cost, to others interested in initiating similar projects. They can be accessed by calling the authors at the Center for Disabilities at The University of South Dakota and the University of South Dakota School of Education at 1-800-658-3080/VTTY.